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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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I'm officially in mourning! The Thanksgiving leftovers are gone. The holiday is now officially over for me. Big sigh...

Hey, look out the window - it appears that winter is bearing down on us with a vengeance! You may have recently noticed the Northeast made the national news earlier in the week. We got hit with a brief snow squall which resulted in traffic snarls being compared to those from the Blizzard of '78! I was one of the fortunate who, because of my early work hours, missed it entirely! It took some of my staff over four hours to get to work! And there was barely a dusting of snow on the ground! I couldn't believe some of the horror stories that I was hearing until I saw some of the reports on the evening news later that day. Driving home that afternoon after work showed little evidence that we ever had any snow!

And now the bitter cold is stuck in a pattern over us. Naturally, the weekend is likely going to be "ruined" with a major snowstorm. I better make sure that the snowthrower is ready to go; it may be a long snowy winter again this year! Fortunately, my home projects planned for this weekend are indoors. We've completed almost all of the new flooring in one of our new rooms. I hope to finish off that room and the other one this weekend; and hope I don't have to go out for any last-minute supplies!

Well, it's time to get bundled up and ready for some snow, so let's move on to this week's issue!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. I'm going to tell you right up front that this column is going to be quite short. Okay, okay, stop the cheering.

<grin>

I've had a hell of a couple of weeks. I probably should preface this by saying that my family is very close. We all hang together... not quite like "The Waltons", but then again, who is, right?

My grandfather has had some fairly severe medical problems recently. He's been in a convalescent home for the past several months, has diabetes, heart and lung problems, and has recently started having kidney problems. He's had a sore on his foot for the past month or so that has defied all the powers and wizardry that the medical profession has at its disposal, and today it was necessary to amputate the foot in order to keep him going.

So there we sat in the waiting room... my father, myself and two of my sisters (I've got 3 sisters and 3 brothers). We passed the time by passing stories back and forth. Everything from vacations we'd spent together to things that happened just a few weeks ago.

The most amusing, and the one that probably made everyone in that wing of the hospital think that we had escaped from a different wing of the hospital. But if it's true that laughter is the best medicine then we just might have cured a patient or two.

Here's what we were laughing about...

My grandfather has recently started fantasizing about things in both the far and near past. One of his lesser fantasies is that he bought a trailer or motor home of some sort and gave it to one of my brothers.

We have all teased my brother quite a bit about it... "Hey Rick, how's that trailer workin' for ya?"

It was I who broached the subject this time, and said that both my brother and myself had simply played along when my grandfather asked me if I had seen the trailer yet, and asked my brother if he liked it. I said I had not seen it, and my brother said that yes, he and his family were enjoying the trailer.

At this point in my story, one of my sisters... the one who has done the most for my grandfather the past several years... shook her head and said seriously, "Ricky gets EVERYTHING!"

The other sister in attendance and I started laughing. The 'jealous' sister continued, "Hey, I've cooked and cleaned and helped grampa for years and RICKY gets the trailer?? I mean, c'mon, even if imaginary...!"

We both laughed hysterically again as she looked at us with dismay. After another few minutes of us laughing uncontrollably, both she and my father joined in.

I guess you just had to be there. <grin>

Well, let's get to the news, hints, tips, and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

Allan Davis asks about finding his TOS version:

"I am looking for a program that will identify the TOS version of an Atari STE."

Lonny Pursell tells Allan:

"Grab this app:
http://home.snafu.de/thorsten.bergner/ "

John Garone asks about cache settings for HD Driver:

"What's a good # for HDDriver FAT and Data caches for a 14 meg Falcon?"

'Harry' tells John:

"With 14Mb memory, as many as you like! B^)

Start off with 100 FAT and 1000 Data and you won't go far wrong."

John replies:

"Thanks Harry. Would it be a waste to increase the FAT cache to 1000 also?"

Brian Roland adds:

"I say experiment
Too many variables exist from set-up to set up, such as the type of drive(s) and

applications, and the style of operation you're using.

Try things and see what seems to work best for you.
It'd be cool if you'll tell us what you discover."

John asks:

"what in particular should I be looking for in the way of improvement (or not)? Ex: Should files load faster from the drive or copy faster from drive to drive?"

Dr. Uwe Seimet, who should be the last word on HD Driver, since he wrote it, tells John:

"I would not waste any time on these cache settings. Using a fast operating system like MagiC is much more efficient than for improving performance than, for instance, using 500 caches for data sectors instead of 400."

John asks Uwe:

"AT/Data caches were set for 10/10 so should I see a difference with the higher settings as suggested (100/999)?"

Uwe tells John:

"I think the default is 100/100, which is usually fine."

Allan Davis asks about a hard drive for his STE:

"I am looking for the best solution to put a Hard Drive on my 4 Meg STE. Cost, capacity, ease of use are the main considerations. It doesn't matter if it is SCSI or IDE although I may want to put a CD-ROM onto the system at some point which may indicate that SCSI would be the better option?

May be a second hand unit could be the go?

Any body who would like to share there ideas please go ahead!"

Brian Roland tells Allan:

"If you can find one....
There was a batch or two of Link 97 SCSI hosts done to fit the STe internally. That's the BEST way to go in my opinion, as this card will do you well with pretty much any SCSI I or SCSI II device, and it fits neatly inside the MegaSTe case, and so can your drive. If you later did want to run some external SCSI, it'd be as easy as using a ribbon cable with your choice of Large or small Centronics on the far end...with a removable external terminator pack (or a simple little toggle switch to enable/disable termination on the internal drive as needed).

Those are hard boards to find tho.....

Another internal option is Atari's own MegaSTe/STacy host adaptor....
You can likely find one of these just about anywhere that still stocks things Atari... Best, ATY, Atari Workshop, Wizztronics, etc....
The catch with this this host, is that AFAIK, it's going to limit you to a 1gig drive....and you can only connect one device...unless you do a hack job on it...in which case it will drive two SCSI devices...but that's it. This board doesn't support parity either! It's a SCSI I host...and doesn't like long cables at all. This host doesn't generate parity either...so you'll need a drive that parity can be disabled...or hack in a parity chip (quite a bit of soldering involved here). Still, all in all, if you shop around, you might get this host with a compatible drive for a reasonable price, and it'll get the job done...and would save ya a good bit on casing/power supply/cabling issues.

Next, there are the external options.
These come in a variety of forms and ages....
The best is if you can find a Link 97 or ICD Link II.
These hosts are basically an external cable with some circuitry built in, and they plug into the Hard Disk (ASCI) port of the ST/e.

Both of these will need to get 5v from somewhere (most fixed SCSI drives can supply this no problem), but both do a good job of supporting a vast array of SCSI I and II type devices, and either should be able to deal with larger/more modern drives.

The 'link' hosts are set up for external cabling. So you'll either need to figure a way to loop it back inside your STe's drive bay, or invest in casing and power supply for your 'external' drive.

There are some IDE kits so I hear....I don't know a thing about them....or where they can be found. Maybe someone else will pipe in with that info.

Finally...there are the old pizza/shoebox options....
Atari's own Megafiles and SH lines....
Various kits built around ICD, SUPRA, etc hosts that mount in the box with your hard drive.
These range from really early ASCI/SCSI/RLL-MFM kits, to pretty modern SCSI I boards. They're getting quite aged and hard to find parts for at a reasonable price....however, if you see a good deal on one somewhere...it's pretty much plug and play

As for drives themselves....
Know what host you're getting and go from there.
Seagate drives are really good about being highly configurable to happily go into just about any SCSI array imaginable...just about anything they make SCSI I or II will work with all the hosts...a majority of the Seagate SCSI III Wide will work with an adaptor as well.

If you want something with removable media....

All the Syquest SCSI removables (44, 66, EZ135, Syjet, etc...) should be fine with any of the SCSI hosts you're likely to find.

IOmega Jaz should be fine.

For IOmega SCSI Zip drives, your host must support parity, and keep in mind that

this drive has no way of supplying term power to the bus...which means if you have a Link type adaptor, and this is the only drive you connect... you'll need to tap 5v from somewhere to power the Link host. If you can read German and French....the Chips'n'Chips HYP set gives all sorts of tips on hacking Zip drives to be plug and go...as well as various other hacks to make various drives work with various hosts. I don't know the URL for chips'n'chips....but a google search should pull it up right away."

Well folks, that's it for this week. I'm running out of steam pretty quickly here. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they were saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - New PSX Is Pared Down!
""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" IGN, GameSpy to Merge!
Midwest Gaming Classic!

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Sony Readies Pared-Down PSX

Sony has dropped several features from its upcoming PSX, a combination video and gaming device. The company has not been able to complete development in time for the year-end sales period, Sony said Monday.

The PSX is Sony's first attempt at tying the worlds of consumer electronics and games together and combines a hard drive-based video recorder, a DVD recorder, a music player, a photo viewer, and a PlayStation 2 game console in a single box.

A prototype of the product was displayed at the Ceatec 2003 electronics show in Tokyo in October this year, where Sony disclosed the PSX specifications for the first time. General product plans had been announced earlier this year.

Last week, Sony said it will launch the product in Japan on December 13 and again published specifications, although there are several major differences between those disclosed in October and those released last week.

Gone from the latest specifications are the abilities to play back DVD+RW discs, play back data CD-R discs (although audio CDs recorded on CD-R discs are supported), display TIFF and GIF format images, display movies taken with Sony's Cybershot digital still cameras, and play back MP3 files. In addition, copying of video files from the PSX's hard drive to DVD discs has been slowed down, from 24X speed to 12X speed, and the device also cannot connect to the PlayStation BB online gaming service.

"We have changed the specification," said Taro Takamine, a spokesperson for Sony in Tokyo. "Basically, as of October 7 we planned some features such as DVD+RW playback, CD-R playback, TIFF and GIF [image file] support, and PlayStation BB, but we decided to drop such features."

The features are gone for two reasons, said Takamine.

The first is to make the device easier to use, he said. He cited the example of browsing digital images and said that entry-level users, at which the device is aimed, will find it easier not having to select among JPEG, TIFF, and GIF formats.

The second reason is that development of some functions missed deadline and had to be left out.

"Also we are not able to complete testing of some formats before the holiday shopping season," he said. "Our priority is to launch before the year end."

Two of the features, the abilities to read DVD+RW discs and to connect to the PlayStation BB broadband Internet service, will be offered as a firmware upgrade for no cost via the Internet, said Takamine, although he could not say when Sony will offer the upgrade. "We plan to do it as soon as possible."

When launched next week, the PSX will support DVD-R/RW writable media, DVD-Video, Audio CDs, and all PlayStation discs, as well as the display of JPEG-format images. It also will support ATRAC3 encoded music, which is a format developed by Sony and used in its MiniDisc players and some other digital audio products.

The machine has also become heavier in the two months since it was previewed at Ceatec. At the time, Sony said it would weigh 12.4 pounds, but the company is now quoting a weight of 12.6 pounds for the DESR-5000 and 12.8 pounds for the DESR-7000 model.

"We do not disclose that reason," said Takamine when asked about the weight difference.

Despite the lack of several promised features the machine is still likely to become a hot seller during the holiday period because of its price and heavy retailer promotion. The DESR-5000 includes a 160GB hard drive, while the DESR-7000 packs a 250GB drive; they carry prices of $730 and $912, respectively.

Combination hard drive and DVD recorders from competitors are considerably more expensive or offer less recording space for the same price. Toshiba's RD-X4, which has a 250GB hard drive and goes on sale in December, costs upwards of $1323. Hitachi's MSP-1000 combines a 120GB hard drive and DVD recorder for around $1003.

Combination hard drive and DVD video recorders have become popular in the last year, and the number of models available has risen sharply from a handful a year ago to numerous models from several manufacturers today.

Sony's PSX, like some devices from competing manufacturers, has one other potential shortcoming. It does not support CPRM (copy protection for removable media); that means it cannot record digital terrestrial television broadcasts, which began on Monday in Japan, unless the signal from an external digital tuner is first converted to analog.

Video Gaming Companies IGN, GameSpy to Merge

Two of the Internet's leading video game companies, IGN Entertainment and GameSpy Industries, on Thursday said they will merge to create a company offering gaming news, information, downloads, data services and community features.

San Francisco-based IGN and Irvine, California-based GameSpy, both of which are privately held, said the deal is expected to close in the first half of 2004. IGN Chief Executive Mark Jung will be CEO of the combined company, and GameSpy Chairman Mark Surfas will be chief strategy officer.

IGN was publicly traded until August, when it went private in a buyout lead by Great Hill Partners and the IGN management team. It is best known for both free and subscription content on games and gaming hardware.

GameSpy provides both gaming content and also gaming technology, allowing publishers to put their games online and manage communities of players.

The combined company will have 194,000 paying subscribers to content and

technology services, with more than 26 million registered users.

Both the IGN.com and GameSpy.com brands are expected to be retained after the deal closes, the two sides said in a statement.

Space Invaders Video Game Set for New U.S. Invasion

Game over? Think again.

Japanese game machine maker Taito Corp. said on Friday it plans to restart sales of "Space Invaders" in the United States, almost 25 years after the game first appeared in video arcades.

The classic arcade game centers on a fleet of invading aliens looking to take over earth, but they must first deal with a lone gunner - the player - holed up behind a fragile set of shields. It has been one of the most popular video games of all time since it was developed in 1978.

"There has been a rebirth of classic video games in America," said Taito spokesman Kengo Naka. "We thought it would coincide nicely with the 25th anniversary of its debut in the U.S."

Taito aims to sell 10,000 of the stand-alone game machines at $2,772 a unit.

While the game will not change in this latest offering, inflation has taken its toll. One play will now cost 50 cents, compared with 25 cents a generation ago.

Since Taito no longer has operations in the United States, the game machines will be made through an OEM (original equipment manufacturer) agreement with game software maker Namco Ltd.

Namco, which also has it own classic video game, "Pacman," will handle sales of Space Invaders in the United States.

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!
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2004 Midwest Gaming Classic Announced

Dates and a location have been announced by the organizers of the 2004 Midwest Gaming Classic. The Midwest Gaming Classic is the Midwest’s only all-encompassing electronic gaming event, featuring a large variety of displays, vendors and special attractions for arcade uprights, computers, pinball and home video games from past to present. The 2004 Midwest Gaming Classic will be held on May 22nd and 23rd at the Brookfield Sheraton Hotel and

Conference Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Please visit the new Midwest Gaming Classic website to learn more about the show and keep abreast of announcements as they are made.

http://www.midwestclassic.net

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Asian Pirates Sell Microsoft's Next Windows System

Malaysia's brazen software pirates are hawking the next version of Microsoft Corp's Windows operating system years before it is supposed to be on sale.

Underscoring the scale of U.S. companies' copyright problems in Asia, CDs containing software Microsoft has code named "Longhorn" are on sale for six ringgit ($1.58) in southern Malaysia. Microsoft's current version of Windows, XP, sells for upwards of $100 in the United States.

The software is an early version of Longhorn demonstrated and distributed at a conference for Microsoft programmers in Los Angeles in October, Microsoft Corporate Attorney Jonathan Selvasegaram told Reuters.

"It's not a ready product," he said from Malaysia. "Even if it works for a while, I think it's very risky," to install on a home computer, he said.

Chairman Bill Gates has said Longhorn, which is not expected to be released before 2005, would rank as Microsoft's largest software launch this decade.

The software is on sale in the largest shopping complex in Johor Bahru, the Malaysian city bordering Singapore, alongside thousands of pirated programs, music CDs and DVDs.

Discs in plastic covers hang from racks in more than a dozen specialized stores in the Holiday Plaza center, even though it has its own police station.

Such piracy is rampant in Asia, although the United States praised Malaysia for seizing thousands of illegal discs since May. U.S. trade losses due to piracy in Malaysia fell to $242 million last year from $316 million in 2001.

Selvasegaram said pirates would shut their shops whenever Malaysian authorities launched a clampdown, only to reopen within days or even hours. He said software companies were working with the authorities on the problem, but the police were more concerned about controlling pornography.

Longhorn promises new methods of storing files, tighter links to the Internet, greater security and fewer annoying reboots, Microsoft has said.

(US $1 = 3.8 ringgit)

Napster Offers Free Trial

It may not be a return to the heyday of free-and-easy song-swapping, but old-school Napster users have a chance to try out the newly launched service with a three-day free trial period this month.

Hoping to persuade holiday shoppers to throw some of their gift-giving cash its way, Napster and its parent company, Roxio, are offering users three days of unlimited listening of its online music catalog of over 500,000 tracks along with access to 40 on-demand radio stations throughout December, the company said Tuesday.

The free installation of Napster 2.0 is for users in the U.S. only and is currently only compatible with systems running Microsoft's Windows XP or Windows 2000, according to Melissa Foo, Napster's retail marketing manager in the U.K.

As an added incentive to sign up for the Napster service, the company is also offering five free tracks that can be burned to CD or transferred to one of 40 compatible portable music devices for those who subscribe to the service for $9.95 per month after their free trial ends.

Since resuscitating the Napster brand with the launch of Napster 2.0 in October, Roxio has been pushing hard to turn the pioneering peer-to-peer song swapping upstart into a legal, money-making business proposition with such innovative marketing ploys as its deal with The Pennsylvania State University, which offers students a "free" version of the service that is paid in part by the student's information technology fee to the university.

The new Napster is similar to existing label-backed services such as MusicNet and is also competing against Apple Computer's popular digital music store, ITunes.

It's been two years since the free Napster service was knocked offline amid accusations of copyright infringement from the major music record labels. In the resulting fire sale of the company, Roxio, in Santa Clara, California, bought Napster's intellectual property and technology patents for around $5 million late last year.

In May, Roxio paid another $39.5 million for the online music subscription service Pressplay, formed by Vivendi Universal and Sony Music Entertainment, with an eye toward using the service's technology as the platform for the revamped Napster.

The paid-service Napster has licensing deals with all five major labels and a handful of independents. Though such licensing deals put constrictions on the Napster service, Roxio is still a CD-burning software provider, and as part of its holiday marketing blitz, it is offering Napster Burnpak. The product couples Napster with Roxio's Easy CD & DVD Creator 6 Starter Kit for $29.99, and with the December offer consumers get to choose five free tracks from Napster that they can download to burn to CD or DVD.

Last, but not least, the company is offering a stocking-stuffer-sized

prepaid Napster Music Card that holds 15 digital music downloads for $14.85. The cards can be obtained at nearly 20,000 retail locations in the U.S., Napster said.

As for a Napster 2.0 outside of the U.S., Foo would only say that the company does have a gameplan for launching the service in Europe sometime in the new year.

Microsoft Revamps MSN

On Tuesday, Microsoft announced its latest online service: MSN Premium. The new service, for use with broadband Internet connections, will be available to the general public in early January and offer a wide range of online features including spam filters, antivirus capability, a firewall, parental controls, photo management, exclusive multimedia content, and multiple e-mail accounts.

MSN Premium is akin to America Online's new AOL 9.0 Optimized service. Microsoft offers a number of applications intended for use with a broadband Internet connection and tied together by a unified graphical interface. Some of the apps are designed specifically for the large bandwidth available via broadband-most notably MSN Video, which provides streaming video from television partners such as the cable news network MSNBC and the sports programming network ESPN.

In addition to tools, the main GUI integrates applications, many of which are based on brand-name titles. Versions of McAfee VirusScan and McAfee Personal Firewall Plus guard your system against unauthorized intruders, a Microsoft Money app manages your finances, the multimedia encyclopedia is Microsoft Encarta Premium, and a Microsoft PictureIt! release manages photos.

The service also provides 11 e-mail accounts. The primary account receives 25MB of storage for messages and 10MB for attachments; the 10 secondary accounts each get 10MB for messages and 3MB for attachments. You can access the accounts via any Web browser as well as through Microsoft Outlook Express and Outlook XP.

MSN Premium without broadband service will be $9.95 per month. If purchased along with a broadband account from one of Microsoft's ISP partners, the cost will vary from roughly $40 to $50 per month. AOL 9.0 Optimized is $14.95 per month on its own and $54.95 per month if AOL supplies broadband service.

When the new service debuts in January, the MSN family will include three different offerings. MSN Plus will be a cheaper, less powerful version of MSN Premium. Likely to be priced between $5 and $7 per month, it will lack several of the leading features and apps, including the parental controls, the McAfee antivirus and firewall software, secondary e-mail accounts, photo software, Microsoft Money, and Encarta. If you don't have a broadband account and want to save a little money on Internet access, you can still opt for MSN 9 dial-up. Priced at $21.95 per month, it lets you access the Internet via a standard phone and gives you all the tools available with MSN Premium except the antivirus and firewall software.

Brightmail Updates Anti-Spam Enterprise Edition

Brightmail will release an updated version of its Anti-Spam Enterprise Edition next Tuesday that promises to seek out and destroy more spam, provide corporate IT additional administration tools, and allow users of Notes and Outlook to better filter junk mail from their inboxes.

Anti-Spam Enterprise Edition 5.5, which will launch Dec. 9, offers administrator-configurable spam thresholds that set the aggressiveness of the filters, automatic updating of blacklists, and additional reporting functions for monitoring spam volume and junk mail characteristics.

A new agent for Domino and an updated plug-in for Outlook - which provide end users with better control of the spam filtering capabilities of the server-based software - are also part of the update, said Brightmail.

Yahoo Proposes New Internet Anti-Spam Structure

Internet services company Yahoo Inc. on Friday said it is working on technology to combat e-mail spam by changing the way the Internet works to require authentication of a message’s sender.

Yahoo said its "Domain Keys" software, which it hopes to launch in 2004, will be made available freely to the developers of the Web’s major open-source e-mail software and systems.

Spam - unwanted Internet e-mail, direct advertising, body part enlargement, and other commercial endeavors on the Web - has quickly become Web surfers’ Public Enemy No. 1 as inboxes around the globe are clogged with hundreds of such messages daily.

Governments around the world are working on legislation to reduce spam, but in the interim a number of companies have stepped in with technology proposals designed to filter and block the electronic detritus.

Under Yahoo’s new architecture, a system sending an e-mail message would embed a secure, private key in a message header. The receiving system would check the Internet’s Domain Name System for the public key registered to the sending domain.

If the public key is able to decrypt the private key embedded in the message, then the e-mail is considered authentic and can be delivered. If not, then the message is assumed not to be an authentic one from the sender and is blocked.

"One of the core problems with spam is we don’t know, Yahoo doesn’t know, the user doesn’t know ... if it really came from the party who it says it came from," Brad Garlinghouse, vice president for communication products at Yahoo, told Reuters. "What we’re proposing here is to re-engineer the way the Internet works with regard to the authentication of e-mail."

While it might seem that Yahoo would need essentially all of the world’s e-mail systems on board with Domain Keys for it to work, Garlinghouse said the technology would work if even a few major providers adopt it.

"If we can get only a small percentage of the industry to buy in, we think

it can have a dent," he said.

Andrew Barrett, executive director of the SpamCon Foundation, an anti-spam organization, said Yahoo’s sheer size in online e-mail would give the technology a boost.

"The fact that Yahoo, one of the four big players in the space, is making it happen gets it a long way there," he told Reuters. "It’s a great tool to have in the toolbox."

Garlinghouse also argued that Yahoo’s proposal should be attractive to other e-mail providers because it is free and comes with no special restrictions.

"You look at a lot of the proposals for spam management out there (and) they king-make," he said. "Are we trying to propose something that benefits us disproportionately? Not at all."

SpamCon’s Barrett cautioned, though, that implementation would not be without its costs.

"It’s a good approach for those that are willing to use it," he said. "Any kind of cryptographic solution is going to involve some computing overhead, and that’s not cheap."

Facelift for Hotmail Goes Live

Tuesday, Microsoft announced a new version of its MSN online service that will be available in early January. Today, the company unveiled a new version of Hotmail, its Web-based e-mail service. This update, already available to the general public, includes improved spam filters, calendar software, and a contact application for keeping track of names, addresses, and phone numbers.

Much like the similar services from Yahoo! and Mail.com, Hotmail lets you send and re-ceive e-mail via the Internet using any browser. You don’t need a standalone e-mail client or an e-mail address assigned by an employer or ISP, and if you’re willing to forgo a few amenities, you can use the service for free.

A few minor changes appear in the service’s overall interface. The company says that opening and editing your list of favorite contacts is easier, for instance. Microsoft also points to improved anti-spam tools that use technology from Brightmail, one of the leading vendors in the field. You can also adjust the stringency of the service’s junk mail filters and alert Microsoft to specific spam messages.

But the real news is the addition of calendar and contact software. Much like Outlook, Microsoft’s standalone e-mail client, Hotmail now lets you share your calendar with friends and family, receive reminders for important appointments, and navigate through the phone numbers and addresses of all your contacts.

A basic version of Hotmail is free, giving you 2MB of storage for messages, 1MB for at-tachments, and a tool that scans for (without removing) viruses. A pay version of Hotmail is available for $19.95, giving you 10MB of message storage and 3MB for attachments.

According to Microsoft, more than 145 million people use Hotmail each month.

AOL Offers New Subscribers $299 PC Kit

In its latest attempt to stem declining subscriber numbers at its flagship Internet service, America Online is offering new customers a computer for $299.

The offer, which expires at month's end, requires a one-year subscription at $23.90 a month. The low-end computer comes with a color printer and 17-inch monitor, a package worth about $750.

AOL and other Internet services introduced similar deals in 1999, offering $400 rebates on computer equipment for subscribers who signed up for three years. The expensive promotions ended after a few years.

AOL, of Dulles, Va., is still the largest Internet service provider, with 24.7 million U.S. subscribers on Sept. 30. But it has lost 2 million subscriber since last year to competitors with cheaper dial-up service and faster broadband connections.

Last month, AOL introduced a dial-up service with limited features for $9.95 a month under the Netscape brand.

The computer included in the latest promotion, which was first reported by The Wall Street Journal, is built by Systemax Inc., of Port Washington, N.Y. It has a 1.7 gigahertz Intel Celeron processor, 256 megabytes of memory and a 40 gigabyte hard drive. It has a CD-ROM drive, but no CD burner or DVD drive.

The printer is a Lexmark color inkjet model.

Spammers Unleash E-Mail Worm to Disable Critics

Anti-spam organizations are the target of a new Internet worm outbreak that tries to knock them offline with a crippling data barrage, computer security experts said Tuesday.

Virus experts believe the worm, W32/Mimail-L, is the work of a vengeful spam e-mail peddler bent on paralyzing organizations that try to deal with spam, the torrents of get-rich-quick schemes and body-enhancement deals that clog in-boxes daily.

"It's the third Mimail variation to come after us, except this one is trying to do more," said Steve Linford, founder of The Spamhaus Project, a British-based group that singles out spammers. Spamhaus was hit by Mimail late Monday.

According to anti-virus and spam-filtering company Sophos Plc, the Mimail-L program comes as an attachment to an e-mail purporting to be from a woman named Wendy who details an erotic encounter and then offers naked photographs.

Clicking on the attachment activates the virus. Once triggered, the worm forwards itself to other e-mail users.

The worm can also turn the affected PC into a "zombie," which can then be remotely commanded to bombard one of a select group of targets, such as Spamhaus, with a disabling blizzard of data - a so-called denial-of-service attack.

In a new twist, a follow-up e-mail is sent to the infected user stating that an order for a CD containing images of child pornography will be delivered to their postal address.

To stop the order, the e-mail advises, they should respond to what appears to be an e-mail address for billing complaints, but which is actually an e-mail for one of the eight targets.

"So many Internet users are flooding us with complaints about these child porn CDs that we supposedly ordered for them," said Linford, adding that he was cooperating with police.

He believes the worm was the work of one of three organized spam gangs that traffic in stolen credit cards and have hit him with distributed denial-of-service (DDOS) attacks in the past.

"These guys write trojan (viruses), they carry out DDOS attacks and they get their money through selling stolen credit cards and spamming," Linford said.

Virus experts said the outbreak was light compared to the rash of worms and viruses that plagued the Internet last summer. "We have had reports in the dozens, not in the hundreds," said Graham Cluley, senior technology consultant for Sophos.

"But what this shows is that there is more evidence that virus writers and spammers are now colluding," he added.

Security experts have been warning that some spammers have adopted virus-writing tactics to silence their biggest critics.

The stakes are high. Anti-spam organizations create black-out lists of known spammers that are then distributed to other Internet service providers to automatically reject messages coming from these sources.

"They are angry with us because we try to stop the spamming cycle," Linford said.

Is Your PC Sending Viagra Spam Behind Your Back?

Security experts have identified what they suspect to be the biggest culprit behind that seemingly unceasing torrent of e-mail spam messages and computer virus outbreaks.

The unwitting culprit, they say, is the home user with a broadband, or always-on, connection. In fact, it could be you.

Viruses and related "worms" typically target computers that run on

Microsoft Windows and have a high-speed broadband connection. In the past six months, a new generation of bug has emerged that contains a so-called "trojan" program which discreetly installs itself into the innards of the PC.

An effective "trojan" gives the author near complete control of a victimized machine - almost always a computer that is not equipped with proper firewall and security software.

The result is that the computer becomes a "zombie" ready to carry out any nefarious command.

Once hit, a computer user would never suspect that through their machines flow waves of spam and e-mail-borne viruses, experts say.

Some machines have even been commandeered to participate in debilitating "denial of service" attacks, sending a flood of data requests capable of knocking an internet company offline.

The fast-spreading Sobig.F virus this summer was the first to do this, experts said.

Suresh Ramasubramanian, manager of Hong Kong-based e-mail filtering company Outblaze, said the volume of spam his firm has intercepted has exploded since Sobig.F emerged in August.

Increasingly, it appears to be average home users whose PCs send out discounts for Viagra and penis-enlargement offers. "These are your typical church-going people," he said.

With countries outlawing spam and even setting criminal penalties and fines, some industry observers wonder if ordinary computer users will get caught up in a dragnet.

"Almost a third of all spam is being sent from hijacked, innocent computers," said Graham Cluley, of British virus and spam-filtering firm Sophos.

"What happens if it’s actually grandma or little Timmy’s computer sending out the spam?"

British police recently warned that crime syndicates, many in Eastern Europe, are using denial of service attacks to blackmail businesses, threatening to knock them offline unless they pay a small fee.

These groups are honing their virus-writing skills to build up an army of machines to use at their beck and call, investigators say. For now, sending spam through an affected machine is more common.

It is one of a series of new tricks spammers and virus writers have devised to obscure their tracks. Known spammers are often blocked by spam filters, thus making it crucial to mask their identity through a computer user with a clean record.

Steve Linford, founder of the spam-fighting organization The Spamhaus Project, said his firm has gathered evidence of spammers hosting Web sites that hawk everything from prescription drugs to pornographic images to Russian brides on hundreds of thousands of Internet-connected PCs.

A spammers’ Web site hops from infected computer to infected computer in a

digital version of cat-and-mouse. Linford estimates the ranks of machines capable of piggy-backing sex sites and the like grows by 100,000 machines per week.

"Every time we trace to a Viagra web site now, the site will change location, sometimes every five to 10 minutes," he said. "It’s a very popular spamming method."

Look Out for the eBay Scam

Phishing-e-mail and Web-based efforts by online scammers to hijack personal information from unsuspecting users-hit home at PC Magazine this week. A number of magazine staffers, who are a members at eBay, received highly official looking e-mails, purportedly from eBay’s accounts management department, asking for credit card information, a social security number, and more. The magazine staffers caught the ruse and notified eBay, but users should be warned that a fake eBay mail scam is making the rounds.

The trick message arrived with a very official looking header featuring eBay’s logo. It was signed "Thank you, Accounts Management." The text read: "Dear eBay Member, We at eBay are sorry to inform you that we are having problems with the billing information of your account. We would appreciate it if you would visit our website, eBay Billing Center, and fill out the proper information that we are needing to keep you as an eBay member." The "eBay Billing Center" referenced was a link to a Web page asking for a credit card number, a social security number, and more. The message also contained an "ebay.com" suffix, just as a real message from an eBay employee might.

As is often true in spoof messages and phishing efforts, the trick e-mail contained telltale signs that it did not come from eBay. The subject line of the message read "eBay Member Billing Information Uptade" with the word "update" misspelled. The text string "fill out the proper information that we are needing" also had suspicious syntax.

The PC Magazine staffers who received the solicitation contacted eBay about the e-mail in question and received a lengthy response back, saying that the message was not generated by eBay. The response included the following text: "Thank you for contacting eBay’s Trust and Safety Department about e-mail solicitations that are falsely made to appear to have come from eBay. These e-mails, commonly referred to as "spoof" messages, are sent in an attempt to collect sensitive personal information from recipients who reply to the message or click on a link to a Web page requesting this information. The e-mail you reported did not originate from, nor is it endorsed by, eBay. We are very concerned about this problem and are working diligently to address the situation. We have investigated the source of this e-mail and have taken appropriate action."

The message from eBay’s Trust and Safety Department also warns against supplying personal information in any e-mail and says that eBay will never ask, via e-mail, for information such as a credit card number or an e-mail password. It says that users who are suspicious of any message appearing to come from eBay should not click on any links supplied within the e-mail and that users can mail a question to spoof@ebay.com.

This latest ruse falls in line with growing amounts of data showing that online identity theft is an out-of-control problem. According to a recent

FTC survey, 27.3 million Americans have been victims of identity theft in the last five years, and a whopping 9.9 million people joined this unfortunate list in just the last 12 months. "For several years we have been seeing anecdotal evidence that identity theft is a significant problem that is on the rise," said Howard Beales, Director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection, in announcing the survey results. "Now we know."

Toshiba Hopes to Make Big Mark with Erasable Ink

It may not be the paperless office many once thought possible, but it may be the next best thing.

With Toshiba Corp's new erasable ink, the green at heart can have their paper without the guilt.

The company's new "e-Blue" erasing machine uses heat treatment to remove words and images printed with erasable toner on 400-500 A4 sized pages at a time.

The process takes three hours, and will allow companies to re-use paper and cut office waste.

"Despite new tools like e-mail and the development of all sorts of wireless technologies, people still just like to have things in paper," said Toshiba spokesman Junichi Nagaki. "We don't think demand for paper will ever disappear completely."

Toshiba will launch the toner and erasing machine, which will retail for around 300,000 yen ($2,744), on December 8 in Japan.

It is targeting corporate clients and paper-shuffling public sector organizations that use laser printers.

For the old fashioned, the company will also offer erasable ballpoint pens and markers.

Paper accounts for about 40 percent of office waste in Japan, Toshiba says. About 60 percent of that is recycled.

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